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ABSTRACT

Three "deep structures" of the literary curriculum (contexts within which teachers teach literature) have been identified: (1) the imitative structure, in which students learn about the background of the text, (2) the analytic structure, and (3) the generative approach, dealing with a work's effect on readers. While experienced literary critics and teachers can experience a piece of writing fully and then place it into a clarifying context, in class the obvious truth that the literature must be truly experienced first is often ignored; instead students "study literature" and learn the professor's contextual approach. A fourth deep structure or context, designed to help students recreate for themselves the communication of the author, may be called the experiential context. In using this context, one instructor has made two pedagogical decisions: he encourages students to outlaw all qualitative judgments and expressions of emotional reaction with respect to literary works and to each other's comments; and he teaches nothing about the literature. These methods avoid the creation of a dominant view in the classroom; rather, they exclude everything but the experience of the literature itself, permitting students to rediscover their own power to see what authors say. (GT)

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Text and Context in the Teaching of Literature

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Barrett J. Mandel

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> "When a man tries to thwart himself in his desire for delight, converting it merely into his desire to know, or to do good, then the cause must be that his power of feeling delight has lost its natural bloom and healthiness."
>
> - Tagore (Personality)

Barrett J. Mandel

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I would like to begin with a few words about the work of one of our distinguished colleagues, Alan Purves, and then to use some of his ideas as stepping stones to my own main point. Borrowing from the language of transformational generative grammarians, Purves has described three "deep structures" of pedagogy and criticism.[1] ["Culture and the Deep Structure of the Literary Curriculum" in Curriculum Theory Network, II (1975), 139-50.] Penetrating below the "surface features" of personal, idiosyncratic teaching flourishes and habits, Purves identifies as the three deep structures of the literary curriculum the following: (1) the imitative structure (by which he means the notion that students ought to know something about the culture and heritage giving rise to the text at hand); (2) the analytic structure (that is, the approach which treats the individual work as a separate entity worthy of close examination and internal scrutiny); and (3) the generative approach (by which he points to the effect of a work of literature on the emotions, inner images, fantasies, and aspirations of the readers themselves).

What Purves has helped us to see is that the teacher, whether he or she knows it, usually examines a text in a very real, palpable structure--or what I shall call from now on a "context." The students not only read the work of literature, they also learn about the context in which the literature is being examined by the instructor.

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Since each context requires a special vocabulary and certain acquired skills, what a course often becomes is the study of literature in a particular context. The context vies with the literature for the students' attention. The students are asked or simply expected to read the text _through_ the matrix of the teacher's critical approach. Of course this procedure can be intellectually stimulating. I use it myself with graduate students with some success. Learning _about_ literary context has clearly become for many as rewarding a human endeavor as learning directly from the experience of the literature itself. Nonetheless when we read a work of literature within a particular context, the context inevitably allows us to see only certain features of the work. Heisenberg pointed out this phenomenon in physics, and it is just as true in literature: we see only what we can see from a particular angle, and we can't see that we don't see what we don't see. Our teaching context closes us from as much as it opens us to. In the _Dynamics of Literary Response_ (NY, 1965), Norman Holland admits, "Psychoanalytic critics find (in a work of literature) a core of fantasy; other kinds of critics find cores of social, biographical, political, philosophical, moral or religious meaning"(31). What I am saying is that depending upon in what deep critical context the teacher's pedagogy is grounded, the work of literature becomes abstracted into the language characteristic of his or her own way of seeing. In other works, when Strindberg's Mrs. X in _The Stranger_ loads the toy pistol and shoots it at the frightened Miss Y, each critic abstracts that concrete experience into terms compatible with his or her own vision. The imitative critic, interested in culture and schools of thought, may become conscious of the way in which the episode serves the ends of realism;

the analytic reader sees the gun as the most dramatic metaphor for the violence and sadism of the work as a whole; the generative critic asks the reader to share his or her response to the phallicism implied in the scene. While all of these responses are defensible, there are some problems created as well--at least in the typical undergraduate classroom. And it is to these that I now turn.

It is one thing for readers like Holland and Bleich, Brooks and Warren, Olson and Crane, and you and me to experience a piece of writing fully and then, in the fullness of time and for specific ends, to treat it rationally as a created object worthy of close examination within a particular context which we find fruitful for our professional purposes. That is, it is one thing for a professional critic to place a fully experienced work into a clarifying context and quite another thing for an undergraduate student to be told to treat the play rationally within a critical context prior to his or her full experience of the play. You and I, for instance, usually--though not always--know the difference between what the text <u>says</u> and how we feel about or judge it. For example, we may choose to read a Puritan sermon to see what it says and how it is said; we can do this activity in a way that does not involve our emotions and judgments, even though we are clear that we have feelings and judgments. We know that we do not have to like or dislike the sermon, agree or disagree with its sentiments. We are able to <u>experience the sermon</u>, while choosing not to be run by whatever judgments and emotions we may be having. And you and I know that direct experience of the text must precede the placing of the work into any specific context if we are to derive any true value from the reading process.

In class the obvious truth that the literature must be truly experienced *first* is often ignored. The teacher usually starts right in with analysis as if we read literature primarily to learn from it. Of course one can and will learn from literature, but that is *not* why we read it--at least not primarily.

Let me define as clearly as I can what I mean by "experience." For my definition I draw selectively from *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*: an experience is something personally encountered, undergone, or lived through in present time. Now I am not referring here to the objects of experience, such as emotions, attitudes, opinions, or knowledge. These can all be experienced but are not experience *per se*. By experience I mean the larger context of encounter or living through which embraces all objects of consciousness and is exhausted by none. I can experience this podium as the object of consciousness and I can experience my emotions or opinions as the objects of consciousness. So, by experience I mean the larger appropriation of objects, whether ostensibly external like the podium or allegedly internal like my emotions or opinions.

Likewise one genuinely experiences a work of literature only by encountering it. What generally happens, though, is that one has multiple encounters, external and internal, almost simultaneously. The reading of the work of literature ostensibly "out there" may trigger related experiences allegedly within. In my observation of students discussing literature, I have noticed that they may often experience, say, the meeting of Strindberg's Mrs. X and Miss Y in *The Stronger* and almost simultaneously experience aspects of their own ego--such as their own anxiety, their judgments on the

writing, their opinions about how the work will turn out, and so forth. The external experience gets all mixed up with the internal ones. In fact, in the welter of these ego encounters, many students often overlook their experience of the meeting of Mrs. X and Miss Y altogether. That is, they do not notice their experience of Strindberg's point of view. In not concentrating on the literary event, the student may actually miss it or may invalidate his or her experience of what the author is saying. Instead the student is experiencing his or her own ego in its various forms: boredom, disbelief, negative or positive judgments, and the like.

We can assume that a first-class reader like Norman Holland truly focusses his consciousness and experiences the Wife of Bath's Tale and <u>then</u>, stimulated by his pleasure, looks into his own unconscious psychological identification with the tale. This is not often the way it is with students when we ask them to look at a work through the matrix of Freudian psychology or any other matrix as their way of getting at the meaning of the poem. Look, nobody ever <u>sees</u> an Oedipus complex or denouement or existentialism in a work. These are mental constructs <u>added</u>, superimposed, upon what is to be seen. These superimpositions certainly make it possible to talk <u>about</u> literature but they should not be confused with the experience of the literature. Because if this confusion occurs, Strindberg goes begging for a genuine audience. Smart students figure out how to do well in our courses very quickly. They discover the context in which we place literature, and then apply it by either adding it to their experience or substituting it for their non-experience of the literature. They will conceptualize

and generalize incessantly. But seldom--oh, so seldom--do they ever fully occupy the space of consciousness into which they are invited by Strindberg or the other authors they are reading. Very seldom has a genuine speech act between author and student transpired. That is, very seldom do the students recreate for themselves the communication of the author. The students are instead "studying literature" and learning the professor's contextual approach.

I would like now to introduce a fourth deep structure or context, one designed to create closeness between student and author. I will call this fourth approach the experiential context. The experiential context holds that a direct encounter with a work of literature, with minimal interference from prior beliefs or structures of knowledge, is a powerful, transforming event. It suggests that, to the degree that a reader can directly encounter or confront the author's words without dependency on intervening knowledge or emotions or analysis, a speech act completes itself. The experience resulting from this direct encounter is a non-egoistic surrender to an author's point of view and often produces an expansion of sensibility and significant movement in one's ability to read literature.

What I am describing is a pedagogical context which uses an absolutely artificial approach as a means to get back to something totally natural. It is a context which recreates artificially in the classroom that familiar, contextless, close-up, direct experiential occasion in which one reads the never-to-be forgotten novel through the night: the reading of which is a transforming experience. In

the reading of that novel, the personality of the reader disappears altogether. The reader, we say, is lost in the novel; the reader, surrendering to the novel, merges with and becomes the novel's point of view. No one is reading; no one is home. Reading is occuring and no one can be said to be doing it. The doer--that is, the ego--capable of reading, let along capable of applying critical structures, has totally surrendered to the state of being at one with the author: at-one-ment. The experiential context holds that this at-one-ment is a worthwhile goal in itself. In order to achieve this goal, the teacher, through specific assignments, works to create the circumstances for the students to surrender to their experience of the text, both in the reading of the literature at home and during the class discussions of it. I have found that this at-one-ment can be created or generated within the experiential context.

If I teach from any of the three deep structures, I am mediating--telling my students what to look for or at least how to look in a particular way. I am teaching Mandel, not Wordsworth. I suppose that worse things can happen. But my close observation of these problems for many years has led me to conclude that what is sometimes more appropriate is for the teacher to work to create no dominant point of view in the classroom. What the teacher can do is devise his or her own techniques which snap the student out of preconceptions about the text at hand and into his or her direct experience of the text. Zen masters traditionally handled this matter by yanking the noses of disciples. I do not recommend this approach in class: its compassion could be misconstrued. But its shock effect does, perhaps, point the way. After all, what the

teacher wants the student to discover is that (1) neither the old stand-by abstractions nor newly-minted ones suffice and (2) it is necessary to approach a text directly and bravely.

In order to make this experiential structure more real to you, I will spend a few moments outlining two pedagogical decisions I have made. I share them with you without the suggestion that these personal methods ought to be yours, but only as a way of fleshing out one teacher's techniques for helping students discover their own experience of literature. Any teacher determined to support the student in his or her own quest for insight into the literature itself will be able to devise pedagogical strategies to get there. The goal of my two decisions (there are many other techniques, of course) is the creation of a climate in which the students push through their opinions, prior knowledge, and ego-barriers so that they can encounter the author's point of view as disclosed in his or her words. (Needless to say the author's so-called point of view may take very different shapes within the experiences of different students.)

The first decision has been to encourage students to adopt a special artificial way of talking in class. Specifically, I invite my students to enter into an agreement to outlaw from classroom discourse all qualitative judgments (on each other and on the literature) and all expression of emotional reactions. In other words, I encourage students to suppress, willingly and consciously, all judgments that a character is good or bad (weird, loveable, etc.), that a comment made in class is right or wrong, smart or dumb. I ask them to hold back every urge to argue against a point made by someone else. I also let them know, repeatedly, that analysis and

interpretation are not called for. I make it clear that none of these ego-reactions is bad, but only that they are inappropriate in this course in that they do not help to produce the direct experiential results we are seeking.

Since literature classes almost always encourage judgments and disagreements, you may be wondering what is left to talk about in class if analysis, judgments, disagreements and emotions are discouraged! What I encourage and support is a language of acknowledgement with which students validate each other's point of view. What they do in class is to acknowledge in a neutral way, with such words as "OK," "yes," "I see," and "all right," that they have fully appropriated the previous speaker's experience of the literature. As each student shares her experience of the text, it becomes her responsibility to be as clear as possible. Meanwhile it becomes everyone else's responsibility to see what the speaker is seeing in the text. Whether or not they inwardly agree, they merely have to see what is being seen--and say so. If they do <u>not</u> get the point of view of the student who is speaking, they simply say, without disagreeing or judging what the speaker has said, that the last comment was unclear. The unclear student refines her comment until it is, in fact, clear to every student in the room. At this point it is acknowledged with "OK" or "I see" and the discussion--a discussion directed exclusively to what the students are actually encountering in the text itself and not in their own egos--moves forward, or more accurately, inward into their experience of the text.

This technique, I realize, may sound cumbersome. Actually

students master it very quickly. Its rewards in insightful discourse are often astonishing.

The second pedagogical decision I have made as a way of producing the experiential context is to teach nothing about the literature ever. My job is to guide the students into their own true experience of the literature. I keep the discourse on its track by reminding the class of the ground rules and by making framing or summarizing comments. In the following fictionalized bit of classroom dialogue, I nudge Brenda back onto the track and Nathan moves the train forward toward its destination:

Brenda: I think Hedda Gabler is weird.

Mandel: You have agreed not to pass judgments in here.

Brenda: I didn't think that that was a judgment. She is weird.

Mandel: Brenda, that's what you think. What we want to know is what you see when you look at her. Tell us one thing you actually see.

Brenda: OK, I get it. Isee that she waves pistols at Judge Brack.

Nathan: All right. I see that Hedda resorts to the pistols every time she wants to display her desire to control someone.

A minute later, a student dialogue may sound like this:

Martha: It seems to me that Hedda is very mannish.

Beverly: Wait, Martha. That's not clear to me. Please put it out again.

Martha: [getting frustrated] Well, I feel that Hedda must have been very influenced by her father.

Mandel: Martha, you are providing interpretation. Her father is not even in the play. What is your direct experience of the play? Tell us what you want us to see.

Martha: Oh, I see. General Gabler's picture hangs in the room at all times, and Lövborg and others call Hedda "Hedda Gabler," even though her name is Tesman. I see that in their eyes, she is a Gabler, not a Tesman. Is that clear, Beverly?

Beverly: Totally! And now I see that Hedda feels the power to dominate others with her father's pistols and that she dominates others to the degree that she feels helpless about her own self-domination.

And on it goes like that. A student may be feeling bored or inadequate, holding on to a high-school notion that "Ibsen is the Father of Modern Drama," or liking (or disliking) some other person in the class. As a consequence of agreeing to follow the rules of the course (thereby already creating the conditions for ego surrender), she chooses to withhold all these ego-bound thoughts. What she allows herself to verbalize is that she sees what the previous speaker sees and that she herself now sees thus and such.

A climate of intellectual support and a dialogue leading to clarity are inevitably produced by the students' willingness to follow the course ground rules and by my choice to teach nothing that I know about Hedda Gabler. Unencumbered with the need to learn my point of view or a language of one-upsmanship, the only thing left for the students to do is "find the way."

The experiential context excludes everything but the experience of the literature itself, which, as you can perhaps imagine, begins to stand forth with considerable vividness.

In the experiential context, there is no teacher's point of view to hang onto, nothing of the professor's to learn or master, no way to achieve points by being school-smart. Without having to earn points from the teacher, what is to be gotten is the validity of a moment fully lived in the presence of the artist's creativity and the equal validity of that moment dissolving so as to make room for the next. Instead of being distracted from his or her direct and immediate encounter with the literature by the addition of imitation, analysis, or even one's own feelings, instead of being seduced by the teacher's stories about literature and life (that is, by the teacher's ego), the student experiences a direct, palpable confrontation with the words of the poet or playwright or novelist.

I can imagine that this approach sounds too structured. You may be feeling that you already incorporate the experiental context in your teaching in a more natural way. I for one am sure that many of you do and am suggesting that we can all serve our students more fully by bringing it into full consciousness, see it as an indendent pedagogical structure, expand it, trust it , and rely on it. My methods, as I have said, are not the issue. They merely help to produce the context--the experience of the reader truly reading. Many routes are possible.

We have not been accustomed to speak about teaching in and of itself as a serious enterprise. What is fashionable is to fund research projects developed along sound scientific principles. I

support this fashion; we need to know more. But while we wait for the results to come in, is it not clear that beneath all our research and scholarship and pedagogical structures is the knowledge that it is possible for our students and ourselves to be directly touched by the authors we love and the world illuminated by the experience? It does not require the results of research to prove that, if we, as teachers, can allow students to dissolve the concepts which keep them from truly reading, they will, in fact, rediscover their own power to see that authors say what they say and that they mean it.

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